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ABSTRACT

Teaching composition in a prison is different from teaching composition in a traditional freshman composition classroom. Since most prison inmates have a high school equivalency degree earned while in prison, a developmental writing course offered prior to the standard freshman composition sequence is probably necessary. Such a class may include a little of everything--reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary building, grammar, mechanics, organization, study skills--because the inmates lack so much information. Inmates also need an explanation of academic jargon, such as "syllabus" and "credit hours". While much of the grammar work must be done by means of exercises and mechanical drills, as much writing as possible should be incorporated into the grammar study. The subsequent course in the freshman composition sequence may or may not need radical alteration. A modification of the basic subjective approach to composition may be a combination of the case approach to composition and letter writing. Persuasive writing is suitable because each student has a natural case to argue. The criteria of appeal and utility help to limit drastically the kinds of courses offered in the writing field of English. Technical rather than creative writing should be offered. If literature is to be taught, the reading should speak to the issues of honor, fidelity, tolerance, responsibility, consideration, discipline, and love. Although prison education is different in form and content from traditional instruction, the goal is the same: the encouragement of dignity and self-fulfillment for the good of society as a whole. (HOD)

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Designing an English Curriculum for Prisons

At a recent meeting, a colleague of mine from the Criminal Justice Department remarked that teaching Freshman Composition in a state prison is no different than teaching it in a traditional classroom. And from the lack of research and publication on the subject, it would seem that members of our discipline concur. However, having taught in both places, I disagree. In fact, teaching in prison is unique, with many significant differences. But, like much non-traditional education, "behind the walls" instruction has gone mostly unexamined. The Federal government, which has yet to mandate post-secondary education in state prisons, collects no statistics on the subject; each individual university or state program, therefore, remains isolated, and there is no reliable information about the number of states with programs, the shape of these various endeavors, or even the number of prison inmates involved in higher education. The entire subject of college courses offered in prisons has--incredibly, in this computer age--gone virtually ignored until recently.

Last year, at this convention, I read a paper that sought to analyze some of the major traits peculiar to an inmate student population. (An expansion of this paper is soon to appear in the Journal of English Teaching Techniques.) Working with these differences, I would now like to consider the question of designing a successful English curriculum for an associate degree program in prisons. The thoughts that follow, broad generalizations and blatantly opinionated, don't pretend to be definitive. Rather, they exist to stimulate discussion and even provoke rebuttal.

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In my experience in Tennessee and Arkansas, most of the inmates in prison classes have a high school equivalency degree earned "behind the walls" rather than a standard high school diploma. For this reason, a developmental writing course offered prior to the standard Freshman Composition sequence is probably necessary. In such a class, it is tempting to include a little of everything--reading, writing, spelling, vocabulary building, grammar, mechanics, organization--because the men lack so much information. However, the fundamentals of language need to be stressed, for here will be students who, for the first time in their lives, are ready to learn the basics that they have ignored for years. Nevertheless, the first class meeting might profitably focus upon study and test-making skills. This is also a good time to explain what, to many of these grade-school dropouts, is an incomprehensible jungle of academic jargon: "credit hours," "semesters," "bachelor's degree," "syllabus," and "mid-term" to name only a few. An instructor must constantly be on guard against taking for granted information which, obvious to him, is beyond the experience of a non-college population. The intelligence is not lacking, but the experience with formal higher education is nil.

The failure to succeed in public schools and the consequent GED education is, perhaps, the most influential factor in constructing a developmental composition course since students are able to pass the GED with a minimal knowledge of English grammar and composition. A thorough review (in some cases introduction) of these principles will probably consume most of the semester. In this beginning class, where study skills are shaky even among the best-prepared student and where much of the work builds on previous assignments, I do not hesitate to give weekly quizzes to insure the mastery of important material. And these students react less negatively to quizzes than do members of traditional classes.

In fact, some welcome the immediate proof of success or failure that quizzes offer. (Parenthetically, I manipulate these quizzes in the beginning of the course to help build self-confidence within the calss, a needed but absent quality in prison.)

Since most prison classes meet but once a week in very long sessions, a variety of class activities helps to keep the attention of both student and instructor. A relaxed, workshop format has worked nicely for me, and the men seem eager to participate in the class. They like to put their work on the blackboard or projector, to participate in grammar bees, peer evaluation, conjugation recitals, and to volunteer for examples and answers. In most of my prison classes, I have found a fairly strong sense of fraternity that makes in-class work more successful than in conventional situations. While much of this grammar work must be done by means of exercises and mechanical drills, as much writing as possible should be incorporated into the grammar study. In Arkansas, at least, to maintain a tight schedule for the GED classes and to keep pass rates up, the teachers in the high school classes tend to teach the programmatic GED examination and have, therefore, little time to spend on composition. Writing, consequently, is a necessity. When possible, I have students practice their grammar work by means of sentence generation rather than more mechanical exercises. To give them something to write about and to increase their limited exposure to the world, I use the school newspaper which offers both serious and trivial readings in a context easy to approach.

The subsequent course in the Freshman Composition sequence, the first semester of the traditional offering, may or may not need radical alteration according to how it is taught in the conventional setting. For reasons I can only guess at--

the regimented prison life, the threat of individualism, the programmatic shape of the GED course--the prison student seems to adapt more quickly and be more comfortable with prescriptive methods of composition than the free-world student. Unfortunately, once he masters these artificial forms, he is loath to leave them behind and experiment with more sophisticated structures and methods. With great hesitance, therefore, I suggest that a subjective approach to composition might be more valuable "behind the walls" than a traditionally prescriptive one. Though in my traditional university classes, I scorn the "touchy-feely" method, prisoners need the autonomy, the freedom, the challenge that this method provides. They have more trouble getting in touch with themselves and writing from experience. It is easy for them to retreat into the safety of some pre-determined structure or organization, and for that reason they need to be encouraged in spontaneity and self-initiative.

A modification of the basic subjective approach to composition that I find useful in this first semester of standard composition is a combination of the case approach to composition and letter writing (letter writing because almost all prisoners are avid correspondents). In his paper presented here last year, Professor Tadlock defended the case approach to composition as a means to restrain subjectivity without losing enthusiasm. When a student writes about hypothetical cases, according Tadlock, it "makes the need to write seem real, emphasizes problem-solving and the writing process, and provides students with a clear sense of audience." When the cases are premised upon legal tangles similar to those faced by the students and when the instructor assigns fictitious letters to judges, attorneys, or wardens, then the composition practice takes on an even greater immediacy. In fact, the practice that the students gets in structuring, development, grammar, and mechanics may very easily be applied to the real letters

he writes to parole boards, appeals panels, and governors.

Whether to include reading in a freshman composition course--and what sorts of reading--is as sticky a question for the prison curriculum as it is for the conventional Freshman program. And like my basic approach to this course, I have arrived at contradictory conclusions for the two groups. For my traditional classes, I interpret "composition" quite literally, while "behind the walls" I use a short reader. My defense is this: most of my conventional students are taking other courses and reading in them, but I cannot make that assumption with an inmate student for whom the English course may be the only subject he takes.

The second semester of the traditional Freshman Composition sequence has some of the same problems as the first semester. To arrive at subjects to write about, however, I would here stress persuasion rather than exposition. For one, the kinds of persuasion--ethical, logical, and emotional--offer some sharp distinctions around which to focus the writing work, and each kind leads to a different emphasis and structure. But persuasion is also suitable "behind the walls" because each student has a natural case to argue, his own. There is no motivation problem with these assignments. In fact, argument and persuasion are endemic to prisons where verbal ploys, rhetorical machinations, and persuasive writing avaiable as examples and models for these students to read and study.

An important part of the second semester of Freshman Composition at my institution is the library research paper. But prison libraries, unfortunately, are woefully inadequate and house insufficient materials for real research work. A way around

this obstacle is to use casebooks. While a casebook certainly doesn't substitute for research, it does offer a means for analyzing opinions, synthesizing an argument, establishing a focus for the paper, practicing the inclusion of quotations into one's own prose, and working with footnotes and footnote form. This modification adapts this piece of the traditional curriculum to the prison setting, but not without a loss.

The Freshman Composition courses are by far the most important sequence taken by the prison population, and all students would need to successfully complete this program to earn an associate degree. And since these courses are required of all students, they must be inclusive and broad based. Elective courses, on the other hand, are traditionally more specialized, narrower. And here is another major difference between the traditional and non-traditional curricula. The electives offered "behind the walls" must be equally inclusive and broad based since the prison student population will have to take most of the courses offered in the prison. The limited number of students, alone, makes this necessary, and the cost and space and time limitations only compound the need. Upper-level English course, consequently, should have wide appeal and broad utility.

The criteria of appeal and utility help to drastically limit the kinds of courses offered in the writing field of English studies. While creative writing has long been a part of prison programs, it has usually been justified as therapy rather than education. (I realize I am here on quite thin ice.) But college coursework, while it may be therapeutic, exists for other reasons. Since the writing electives to be offered are few, technical and business writing courses would seem to be more practical. As our conventional programs cer-

tainly prove, there is a market for people with writing and editing ability. And any advantage we might provide an ex-con in his competition for a job with his "straight," free-world counterpart should be welcomed.

If creative writing programs are an impossible luxury for this curriculum, so are many upper-level literature courses organized historically. Professor Thomas Hruska, in an excellent paper read here last year, related an incident that dramatizes the care with which literature courses must chosen. "No doubt carried away with the sound of my own voice," Hruska recalled, "I am waxing rhapsodic about the nature of romantic love and the significance of sexual drives in literature. My oblivion infuriates one of my students. As I saunter near his desk, he cocks a lifted foot at my crotch and says, 'You don't know where you is, do you man?'" My conclusion: prison is no place for a course on courtly love or even Victorian poetry.

If literature is to be taught, and I think we would all agree on that, then what should be included? In the November 1979 issue of College English, Raymond Hedin advises that "personally pertinent" literature be taught, "literature dealing with problems of race. . .historical fiction. . . and autobiography." Hedin reaches this conclusion because "if there ever was a group of students who have real questions about their lives, who have problems and know or at least sense that they have problems, prison students are the group." Maybe he is right; perhaps there is room for such topic courses as "The Black Man in Western Society," or "Crime and Punishment," or "Individualism and Fate." But to limit the teaching of literature to such a narrow scope is to underestimate both the ability and need of this population. Much of this group lacks a fundamental knowledge of the principles upon which our society is built. They need to be

introduced to the values and goals of our civilization so that they may learn how to participate better in it. And make no doubt, most want desperately to be respected and secure, most dream of being "middle class." To help them attain their goal and to help society by helping them, a wide range of humanistic literature should be included in the associate degree program, readings that speak to the issues of honor, fidelity, tolerance, responsibility, consideration, discipline, and love. Although post-secondary education "behind the walls" is quite different in its form and content than similar traditional instruction, its goals are the same: the encouragement of self-dignity and self-fulfillment for the good of society as a whole.